Spin-doctors, media and mandarins: Why the substance and communication of foreign policy inevitably interact

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Abstract

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) pays insufficient attention to public communication, the media and news management. This is odd, given FPA’s long-established interest in the domestic politics of international affairs, and the wealth of evidence drawn from communication studies showing that journalists influence both public opinion and policymakers’ conceptions of public opinion. This paper rectifies this shortfall by illustrating the inevitable interaction of foreign policy making and foreign policy communication in the contemporary digital media age across three levels of analysis. At an abstract level, the introduction of constructivism into the FPA toolkit problematizes crucial rhetorical constructs such as ‘legitimacy’ and ‘success’. At an applied level, substantive decisions have communication implications, while communication decisions feed back into policy substance. Finally, at a practical level, democratic governments have responded to growing media pressure by bringing spin-doctors into the heart of policymaking. It is no longer the case, if it ever was, that foreign policy is made first, and then ‘sold’. Now it is constructed in a manner that makes it saleable, with active input from news management professionals. Media logic consequently colonises foreign policy decision-making. Foreign policy analysts can ignore its impact no longer.
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Introduction

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) does not take public communication sufficiently seriously. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, it reflects a failure to apply insights about the role of communication derived from both neoclassical realist and constructivist accounts of international politics (Checkel 2008, 72). While International Relations (IR) as a field still largely underplays the importance of communication (Milliken 1999, 240, Kornprobst 2014, 194-195), these contrasting schools of thought have at least begun the process of embedding the idea that how actors interact verbally matters politically. Secondly, it reflects the existence of a separate, vibrant sub-field of research within the broad IR church focused specifically on communication. From this direction comes the theory of the ‘CNN effect’, what one study characterized as a key step in the search for “a communication theory of international relations” (Gilboa 2005, 27). As a mid-range theory it is more closely grounded in actual policymaking practices than the more abstract accounts of how communication affects international politics. At the same time, it says more about what the media does than what policymakers do. It is a theory of media rather than political behavior. As a result a gap remains between the abstract concepts of IR theory and the grounded mid-range ideas of communication scholars, a gap that should be filled by FPA.

Grounding abstract IR concepts in the everyday practices of individual policymakers and states is practically FPA’s reason to exist. Neoclassical realism essentially explains to structural realists why foreign policy matters. Most rational-choice accounts of foreign policymaking fit within its frameworks. Constructivism, meanwhile, has gradually begun to find its place in FPA’s conceptual toolkit (Houghton 2007, 24). Roxanne Doty first suggested
seeing “foreign policy as a social construction” in *International Studies Quarterly* more than twenty years ago (Doty 1993). Marijke Breuning’s excellent analysis of the relationship between rhetoric and reality in foreign aid policymaking and Jutta Weldes’ constructivist dissection of debates over ‘national interest’ appeared soon afterwards (Breuning 1995, Weldes 1996). Together these studies established the utility of a constructivist account for problematizing the social facts that make particular foreign policies possible. Explicitly constructivist and poststructuralist scholarship takes up a growing proportion of the pages of *Foreign Policy Analysis*, the sub-field’s flagship journal (Gaskarth 2006, Nabers 2009, Thies and Breuning 2012). FPA does, in other words, draw on the broader IR theory context as it goes about its mid-range work, and it is increasingly attentive to insights generated by constructivist scholarship in particular. The problem, however, is that it has not yet effectively grounded constructivist ideas in the actual practices of policymakers. The studies cited offer constructivist and poststructuralist accounts of foreign policy, but they are far more abstract and conceptual than is typically the case for a work of foreign policy analysis.

If the key criterion of the viability of an FPA theory is whether practitioners can readily understand it, too many constructivist accounts, for all their elegance and sophistication, fail to measure up.

This paper proposes a bridging strategy to close the gap between abstraction and practice. It introduces the notion of *communicability* to the FPA lexicon. Communicability is a characteristic of individual foreign policies. It describes how readily they can be transmitted (or ‘sold’) to international and domestic audiences, crucially, via the news media. This issue has concerned foreign policy makers for some time, but in recent years the increased pace and scale of the media has prompted greater investment in professional ‘news management’ operations within governments and foreign ministries. This investment has in turn raised the significance of communicability, bringing media advisers into the heart of supposedly
substantive policymaking processes. Within the communication studies literature there are divisions between those who rigidly separate “substantive” and “information” policies (Cohen 1973, 132, Holsti 1996, 203) and those who think the media affects both (Wander 1984, 339, Gilboa 2002, 732). The traditional FPA approach implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) sides with the former group, bracketing public and media communication as part of the implementation of ‘substantive’ policy decisions (Hagan 1995, 133, Webber and Smith 2002, 88, Hill 2003, 277), treating rhetoric as a matter of style (Hermann 1980, 11), or dismissing it as ‘cheap talk’ (Baum and Groeling 2010b, 17).

This study’s discussion of participant accounts, by contrast, suggests that news managers are indeed involved at an earlier stage, advising on what one former British foreign policy official called the “presentability” of different options before substantive decisions are made (Meyer 1989). Communicability thus directly links the substance and the communication of foreign policy. Supposedly substantive decisions are influenced by what appear to be purely communicative concerns. It also links the abstract concepts of IR scholars to an empirical account of actual policymaker behavior. Policymakers may be alienated by talk of discourse, communicative action and speech acts. But they understand that the media matters, that there are good and bad ways of speaking publicly, and that sometimes the words we use to describe a situation shape the actions available to us in responding to it. The concept of communicability highlights how the two ways of thinking can be reconciled without losing either the sophistication of theory nor the utility of applied practical insight.

This paper proceeds in two main parts. The first part establishes the conceptual background, analyzing the way quite different theoretical traditions have integrated the role of public communication into their accounts of international politics. It highlights the neoclassical realist interest in the instrumental use of rhetoric, and the constructivist notion of social facts constituted through communicative action. The second part grounds these
abstract notions in the mid-range theoretical language of FPA using the concept of communicability and drawing on insights from the communication studies literature. It focuses in particular on the role of the media and the feedback effect that arises when governments devote significant amounts of time and energy to trying to influence it. It illustrates the way concern for communicability operates in practice with a case study of foreign policymaking in the United Kingdom based on documentary materials and participant accounts. It highlights the close integration of substantive and communicative elements within the policymaking machinery as well as identifying instances where the two dimensions directly, and inevitably, interact.

Public communication in the theory of international politics

Communication clearly concerns policymakers. Much of their time is spent giving speeches, addressing the media directly, posing for photo-ops, and repeating sound-bites designed to generate headlines and fill airtime on evening news broadcasts. If communication did not matter, leaders would not spend such time and energy on it (Mitzen 2005, 402, Jacobsen 2008, 339). International Relations scholarship has responded to this observation in two distinct ways. The first, epitomized by the work of James Fearon (1994), and expanded upon by Matthew Baum among others, is closely associated with the neoclassical realist school of thought. It emphasizes the instrumental use of public communication within a rational choice account of policymaker behavior. It focuses on how leaders use rhetoric as a signaling device, transmitting information directly at both the domestic and the international levels of analysis. It also touches upon the significance of how communication works under two-level game dynamics (Putnam 1988).
The second approach is very different. Building upon the work of Jurgen Habermas, and his ‘theory of communicative action’ (Habermas 1981), it is most commonly associated with the constructivist school of thought. This approach emphasizes the constitutive role of public communication within a broadly interpretive account of policymaker behavior. It focuses on how leaders and their constituents collectively construct the social facts that make up political reality. Constructivism arguably advances the position put forward by neoclassical realism by adding two additional dimensions beyond the instrumental to our account of the roles public communication can play. The first is the theory of speech acts, or doing something by saying something. When foreign policy involves speech acts, the substance and communication of foreign policy are the same thing. The substantive policy is not just reflected by how it is spoken about publicly, speaking publicly is the policy. The second additional dimension is communicative action itself. Not all public communication is about rhetorical positioning, persuasion and bargaining. It can also be co-operative and interactive, geared towards mutual understanding as a prerequisite for policy agreement and action, rather than unidirectional influencing. As with the neoclassical realist account, then, the constructivist understanding of the place public communication holds in international politics emphasizes the fundamental inseparability of communication and substance.

Neoclassical realism, instrumental rhetoric and audience costs

Every rational choice account of international politics features communication in some form. Bargaining depends on the exchange of information, whether explicitly or implicitly through signaling. Public communication of the sort investigated in this paper typically takes the form of instrumental rhetoric in these analyses. A number show explicitly how rhetorical interactions affect substantive behavior, both in legislative negotiations and
more generally as leaders seek to mobilize domestic constituents behind a chosen course of action (Cameron, Lapinski and Riemann 2000, 187, Baum and Groeling 2010a, 445). Crucially, these studies highlight the irrationality of distinguishing rigidly between substantive and communicative policymaking stages. For one thing, policymaking itself an iterative process, with feedback from the external environment informing successive decision-making steps (Jacobs 1992, 200). In addition, the importance of domestic mobilization to policy success is such that no leader would voluntarily try to implement a decision without due regard to the likely public response. Nor would they wait to try to shape public attitudes until substantive decisions are already made. Policies that lack communicability cannot be implemented successfully. Rational decision-makers should consider communicability among the factors affecting which option to choose at the substantive stage.

The place of public communication in foreign policymaking is additionally complicated by another key neoclassical realist observation. As Robert Putnam highlighted most famously, foreign policymaking requires leaders to bargain simultaneously in closely linked domestic and international arenas. Rhetoric targeted at international rivals echoes in domestic public debate, while those same international rivals can under some circumstances influence domestic debates directly (Putnam 1988, 455). The international dimension makes the communication of foreign policy uniquely complicated. It also opens up opportunities for canny policymakers to exploit the dual dimensions of two-level games. The theory of domestic audience costs sees leaders take advantage of the fact the domestic and international arenas are separate, but related.

Fearon’s original account of how domestic audience costs operate introduced two related conceptual possibilities into a two-level game model of international political interactions. First, he proposed that leaders who publicly declare their objectives in entering a
bargaining situation might face negative domestic political consequences should they subsequently pull back or fail to achieve their goals. Second, he suggested that leaders could use the risk of such consequences as signaling devices, deliberately binding their own hands in order to establish the credibility of their commitments with an adversary (Fearon 1994, 577, Baum 2003, 285). Fearon’s idea was that once rival leaders have proclaimed certain negotiating ‘red lines’, they each know where they cannot expect agreement and where, implicitly, they can (Baum 2004b, 190). International bargaining both depends on, and necessarily generates, domestic public communication, in this account. From a rational choice perspective, then, the substance and communication inevitably interact, and they do so through the deliberate construction of substantive positions with particular communicative consequences. They do so, in other words, through policymakers’ concern for communicability.

That is not to say that Fearon’s account cannot be faulted. It operates on the assumption that domestic constituents want their leaders to demonstrate consistency and achieve success in overseas negotiations (Heffernan 2006, 584, Tomz 2007, 821). This point is in some doubt. Firstly, it is far from clear that citizens hold strong views about the necessity or desirability of leaders taking inflexible positions in international negotiations. Many will quite readily accept a leader backing down from a public commitment they considered unwise in the first place (Clare 2007, 732). For example, President Obama’s failure to enforce his ‘red line’ with military force following the alleged use of chemical weapons on civilians by the Assad regime in Syria in August 2013 did not result in domestic audience costs. Most poll respondents appeared to consider Obama’s change of course a necessary correction to an earlier mistake, regardless of the potential consequences for the country’s international credibility. Secondly, the claim that domestic punishment awaits a leader who reneges on an international commitment relies on two assumptions about the
nature of the relevant state. Citizens must possess sufficient political freedom to register disapproval in a meaningful fashion. Autocrats and lame ducks share a degree of insulation from electoral punishment not available to democratic leaders interested in keeping their jobs (Ramsay 2004, 460). Citizens must furthermore have access to information about their leader’s international-level behavior (Baum 2004b, 191). This assumption is problematic in autocratic states lacking a free media (Baum and Potter 2010, 453). It is additionally problematic when leaders deliberately withhold information. If leaders are sufficiently aware of the power of domestic audience costs that they can mobilize them instrumentally as Fearon envisages, they are likely only to seek publicity for negotiations concerning matters of core interest or principle. Where both parties to a negotiation consider the issues at stake insufficiently important to warrant the risk associated with ‘going public’ they are likely instead, in Matt Baum’s words, to ‘go private’, shielding their negotiation positions from public scrutiny (Baum 2004a, 605). That is why we do not see public bargaining around double taxation agreements or postal service rules.

The notion of communicability helps draw these criticisms back into an instrumental account of the part played by public communication in the foreign policy process. The question of how effectively a policy can be communicated must necessarily be answered before decisions can be made about ‘going public’ or ‘going private’. Answering it will entail calculations about public attitudes, domestic political structures and the availability of alternative sources of information. From a neoclassical realist perspective, then, public communication represents a tool for, an enabling condition of, and an input into substantive policymaking. Three theoretical implications flow from these observations. Firstly, the power of instrumental rhetoric is such that rational leaders will not leave communication to chance, but will consider the communicability of policy options as they choose among them. Secondly, the theory of audience costs shows how communication at one stage of a
policymaking process can constrain substantive decision-making at a later stage. The act of making a commitment is purely rhetorical. No troops are deployed, treaties agreed, bureaucrats mobilized or ambassadors appointed. All that is necessary is for the leader to make a speech. Yet the political consequences of failing to fulfill such a public promise can be significant in material terms. Thirdly, the problems raised by Fearon’s model highlight the difficulties associated with conceptualizing public communication. Persuasive efforts do not always work. Domestic opinion is not always convinced. Leaders who propose policies firmly out of kilter with what their constituents want are more likely to be punished for meeting the expectations they establish than they are for changing course. If it is possible to generate a single theory of foreign policy communication, in other words, it clearly will not be straightforward.

Constructivism, communicative action and speech acts

Communication arguably plays an even more important part in constructivist accounts of international politics. Without communication, social groups cannot construct intersubjective meanings, and so cannot constitute social facts (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 765, Searle 1995, 27). The substance and communication of foreign policy interact, therefore, because without communication there can be no substance, since what we think of as ‘substance’ in international political terms is socially constructed through communication. While constructivists differ over the epistemological implications of this position (Kratochwil 2000, 74), they share an ontological belief that much of the political world is constituted only through human interaction, that it is made up of social or institutional facts that exist only to the extent they are produced and reproduced through language and through practice (Onuf 1989, 94, Wendt 1992, 406). For those of a postmodern or poststructuralist bent, there is no
reality other than what is constituted in discourses, themselves established by the public use of language (D. Campbell 1992, 4, Hansen 2006, 10). Modernist constructivists disagree, maintaining that a positivist approach is still possible even if the reality we study is linguistically determined (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996, 67, Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 892, Wendt 1999, 41). Reality may be made of language, in other words, but that does not mean we cannot distinguish between reality and our observations of it. This problem of “double hermeneutics”, that “we interpret an already interpreted social world” (Guzzini 2000, 147, 162) underpinned Max Weber’s Verstehen approach to social science, geared as it was towards ‘understanding’ rather than ‘explanation’ (Weber 1949, 40). When constructivists consider the role of public communication in international politics, they divide amongst themselves over the application of Verstehen, over the level of interpretation required to achieve understanding, and the level of abstraction necessary to understand particular communicative actions in their proper political function and context. A good deal of the confusion that exists around what constructivism is and how it works stems from this disagreement among constructivists themselves. It is exacerbated by the fact that they still recognize each other as part of the same scholarly tradition despite these fairly fundamental disagreements (Zehfuss 2002, 22).

The basic belief that language constitutes reality exists with varying degrees of significance throughout the spectrum of constructivist and poststructuralist work. It has also appeared in unlikelier quarters, for example the more recent writings of Joseph Nye (2005, 2009, 162-163, 2011, 19). Much of the literature in this area is indebted to a range of social and critical theorists, and philosophers, principally Durkheim, Weber, Foucault and Wittgenstein. The thinker whose arguments appear most frequently in accounts of the theoretical origins of language-based approaches to the study of politics, however, is Habermas. His ‘theory of communicative action’ distinguished between three separate
characteristics of language, the locutionary, or what is said, the illocutionary, or the meaning or significance of what is said, and the perlocutionary, or what effect is intended to be elicited in the audience (Habermas 1981, 295, Kratochwil 1989, 7-8). It therefore goes beyond the purely instrumental account put forward in the neoclassical realist literature, which focuses on the perlocutionary aspect alone. For Habermas, the perlocutionary is less interesting than and logically follows on from the illocutionary, a dynamic first highlighted by John Austin (1962). In Habermas’ ideal-typical model of communicative action, the participants in a public exchange seek not to influence each other but to agree a common definition of the situation as a prerequisite to a collective response. The study of politics, in the terms more commonly used by constructivist IR scholars, is thus the study of how certain political acts are made possible through the social construction of reality (Doty 1993, 298). Habermas accepts that language makes reality, but in the process distinguishes between this constitutive function and the instrumental role of rhetoric, a role he considers secondary and less significant. This makes sense from an IR perspective. Defining the situation logically precedes seeking to persuade others to accept a particular response to it. Communication thus establishes the conditions through which substance can be constituted. Communicability, then, potentially goes even deeper than the consideration of whether a policy can be ‘sold’. It affects whether a policy can even exist in the first place.

In addition to the notion of communicative action, constructivists draw on John Searle’s conception of ‘speech acts’, an idea very similar to that of the illocutionary dimension of language in Habermas’ thought. Searle argued that certain uses of language did not just describe actions, they were in themselves actions (Searle 1995, 34). Typical examples include declarations of war, the performance of marriage rites, the appointment of ambassadors, and so on (Kratochwil 1993, 76, 2008, 457). A speech act directly combines the substantive and communicative dimensions of foreign policy because it is simultaneously
substantive and communicative (Onuf 1989, 82). The act of communication is the policy, representing both decision and implementation. As Quentin Skinner put it, quoting Wittgenstein, according to the theory of speech acts, “words are also deeds” (Skinner 2002, 4). In its implications this aspect of the constructivist account mirrors more closely the neoclassical realist model. Both agree that we cannot adequately distinguish substantive and communicative action given the latter can sometimes also comprise the former.

As with Fearon’s account of domestic audience costs, there are issues with the Habermasian approach. These become clearer as we seek to ground it in empirical observations, a goal pursued in more detail in the second half of this paper. The most fundamental problem is Habermas’ ideal-typical approach, and in particular his assumption that all of the actors in communicative action will hold equal power status. In practice the sort of communicative exchanges likely to influence foreign policy involve substantial power disparities between participants, whether they are rival leaders of mismatched states, or leaders and domestic political rivals, or political elites and their constituents (Checkel 2004, 240, Kaufmann 2004, 8). Additionally, since there is little point engaging in rhetoric towards a rival unwilling to be persuaded, most policy discussions consist of exchanges among elites who hope not to influence each other but to influence third parties, international or (more commonly) domestic (Muller 2004, 404).

This observation has its own implications, however, and suggests a route through which communicative action can be preserved as a useful theory contributing to the explanation of foreign policy making, provided it is properly grounded. If public communication is to be successful, it needs to be responsive (Ruggie 1998, 2, Risse 2000, 8). It needs to accord with audience expectations, to shape intersubjectively constructed social facts from within using ideas and images with which audiences are already familiar (Breuning 1995, 236, Adler 1997, 322, Hopf 2002, 20, Reus-Smit 2008, 409). As we have
already seen under the neoclassical realist heading, even the most instrumentally-orientated uses of public communication still react to audience preferences. It is irrational to behave otherwise, since reactive rhetoric is more likely to work than a rigid, didactic approach. This however leads to an inevitable tendency for strategic rhetoric to correspond more closely to the ideal of communicative action as it develops iteratively over time (Doty 1993, 303, Cole 1996, 95, Risse 2000, 9). Communicative action may be unlikely when the actors involved hold considerable and mismatched authority. That does not mean it cannot happen in a political, and so in a foreign policy, context. Smart leaders interested in harnessing the perlocutionary dimension of language will find a return to illocutionary acts rewarding as they shape the social construction of reality to suit the objectives they ultimately wish to pursue. They will find attention to communicability a necessary prerequisite of policy success. The key factor missing in most theoretical accounts, then, is change over time.

It is difficult to argue that the public justification of foreign policy has nothing to do with what foreign policy analysts do. This paper makes a tougher case, because it insists that public justification affects not just the implementation but the decision-making phase as well, through policymakers’ concern for the communicability of the decisions they take. This section has established the theoretical background to this claim, by highlighting the room opened up in two very different traditions of International Relations scholarship for public communication to affect the way decisions are made. While the neoclassical realist approach offers some useful insights into the logic of public communication, it is only really once a constructivist approach is adopted that the full range of roles communication plays really comes out. Communication is both instrumental and constitutive. It both seeks perlocutionary goals and consists of illocutionary acts. Without communication foreign policy cannot effectively be implemented, so decisions cannot rationally be made about which course to pursue unless the communicability of the options available has been assessed. Yet there is a
prior stage to this, revealed by constructivist insights. Communication affects what possibilities are thinkable in the first place. Communicability is not just about ‘selling’ decisions, it is about making them, too.

**Public communication in the practice of international politics**

This remainder of this paper comprises a detailed illustrative case study of the place of communicability within foreign policymaking practices in the United Kingdom. It draws on evidence covering the period from the 1960s to the present day, while recognizing that official concern for public communication reached unusual heights under the government of Tony Blair. Its main source materials are participant accounts, including interviews conducted with retired diplomats by the British Diplomatic Oral History Project, published memoirs by officials and ministers, and documentary and oral evidence presented to the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War and the Leveson Inquiry into the role of the media in public life. It grounds the conceptual accounts of public communication discussed above in a detailed discussion of how policymakers actually operate.

Drawing on both the IR theories discussed above and more mid-range notions of how the media operates, this part of the paper highlights three important dimensions driving the concern for communicability. The first is that policymakers see public communication, through the media, as an important part of what they do. The second is that policymakers bring communication professionals into the policymaking process, ensuring the communicability of different options influences substantive decisions. The final dimension is that this concern for communicability creates a feedback loop through which the interests, concerns and practices of journalists (and, vicariously, their audiences) affect foreign
policymaking behavior. The substance and communication of foreign policy thus inevitably interact in practice, just as they do in theory.

**Why communicating through the media matters.**

Policymakers care about communication through the media because they see it as a forum for public debate and because they fear the media’s power as an independent political force. When Habermas discussed the waning concept of the “public sphere”, he explicitly denied that the modern news media could take on the role once performed by coffee-houses and bourgeois debating societies (Habermas 1989, 188). His injunctions, however, have not prevented subsequent scholars explicitly identifying the media’s role as a forum for public debate with the public sphere’s role as an arena in which political questions are subject to the collective exercise of reason (Splichal 1999, 26, Castells 2007, 238). Some aspects of what the media does explicitly mimic this rationalizing and legitimizing role, editorial commentary being a clear example. The growth of social media, meanwhile, further creates the conditions for direct participation and the free exchange of opinions upon which the existence of a public sphere relies. Other accounts are less directly related to the public sphere model, but remain important nonetheless as examples of ways the media contains, constrains and conducts public conversations, conversations which play a crucial part in the intersubjective construction of social reality. In these accounts the media appears as a prism, reflecting, focusing and magnifying competing actors’ views for public consumption (Kern, Levering and Levering 1984, 195). It appears as a dominant information source through which the remote reality of international affairs is brought home to individual citizens (Altheide 1987, 161-162, Risse-Kappen 1994, 238, Castells 2007, 241). It takes on the role of a transmission belt linking governments and governed (Risse-Kappen 1991, 514). None of these functions
depend solely on policymakers. All can potentially be influenced by them. Leaders who care about the information that reaches the public, and the way it is framed for public consumption, will inevitably seek to compete in the media’s “marketplace of ideas” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 396, Kaufmann 2004, 5).

A strong belief exists amongst sections of the US policymaking elite that the media, not the military, lost the Vietnam War. It survives despite a lack of evidence this was actually the case (Hallin 1986, 213, Taylor 1992, 270). This sense of the media as a threat to rational policymaking is further fuelled by a growing understanding amongst policymakers of the way journalistic identities and interests intervene to affect what information becomes news (Baum and Groeling 2009, 437, 2010b, 5). Together these ideas inform the ‘CNN effect’ model, according to which media attention to an international issue generates domestic pressure for policymakers to launch overseas interventions against the preferences they would otherwise hold (Robinson 1999, 301). The examples often offered include US action in Somalia in 1992/3 and NATO’s token intervention in Bosnia in 1995. By focusing on particular issues the media can set the agenda for public debate, and so for policymaking (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 176). So at least the argument goes. The notion that the media affects foreign policy in such a deterministic fashion has largely been debunked (Jakobsen 2000, 132, Michalski and Gow 2007, 128, Robinson 2002). The ‘CNN effect’ theory remains useful, however, for the way it draws attention to two key points about contemporary media activities. The first is the speed of media communications and the concomitant expectation that leaders will be able to react to international developments instantly and live on TV (Bennett 1994, 14, Livingston 1997, 293, Gilboa 2002, 736). The second is its recognition that the media is not a simple conduit for information and ideas to flow between public and policymakers (Altheide 1987, 163, Baum and Potter 2008, 40).
The New Labour government led by Tony Blair often appeared obsessed with headlines. Blair’s Chief of Staff Jonathan Powell later concluded this obsession did more harm than good (Powell 2010, 187). It did not arise in a vacuum. It resulted from a deeply-held sense that the alternative to constant media management was being managed by the media, an echo of the CNN effect hypothesis. This was also not merely a New Labour foible. As Ivor Roberts, deputy head of the Foreign Office ‘News Department’ from 1982 to 1986, put it, “while other parts of the Foreign Office had their crises, every crisis was News Department’s crisis” (Roberts 2007, 17). Every major foreign policy issue generates headlines, contributing to how it is perceived by the public, establishing new intersubjective understandings of the situation and shaping the sort of responses policymakers can possibly make. In a rare moment of magnanimity, Blair conceded to the Leveson Inquiry that he didn’t really blame journalists for their constant demand for new information in the 24-hour age; “these guys have to say something. You know, they can’t stand out there and say exactly the same thing they were saying a few moments ago” (Blair 2012, 25). That said, he also expressed concern about media hostility, especially during wartime, to the Chilcot Inquiry (Blair 2010, 446).

Clearly the media is not the only conduit for public communication. But if an individual leader is to convey a message about foreign policy (or any area of policy) effectively to large numbers of citizens, they will have to work through the media. That means being aware of the media’s independent needs and wants, from constant novelty to short, sharp sound-bites. It means bringing in professionals capable of delivering good headlines, supportive storylines and news agendas that follow rather than leading political agendas. It means actively engaging with whatever truncated public sphere might exist through TV broadcasts, newspapers, YouTube and Twitter. It means recognizing that intersubjective understandings are built through communication, and that they have a
constitutive effect on what policy decisions become possible. Media communication, in other words, is what the discursive practice of foreign policy at the domestic level looks like. Each of these dimensions exists, and has existed for some time, in the British context. As the following section demonstrates, this observation has implications in terms for what the practice of British foreign policy decision-making looks like.

News management and communicability

Policymakers employ communications professionals because they believe it is possible to influence the media, and so to shape the social construction of meaning surrounding foreign policy in order to align their own and the public’s ideas (Pfetsch 1998, 71, Esser and Spanier 2005, R. Heffernan 2006, 583). Blair told the Leveson Inquiry that it would be “an act of insanity” for a serious leader not to employ strong news managers to maximize their positive press coverage in the 21st Century (Blair 2012, 9). This belief is not without foundation. It is indeed possible for policymakers to ‘manage’ the news effectively, though it is not easy (Page 2000, 88, Klarevas 2002, 433, Soroka 2003, 27, Knecht and Weatherford 2006, 714). In theory, a government that successfully leads the news agenda wins considerable influence over domestic political debates (Page and Shapiro 1992, 12, Zaller 1994, 186-187, Bennett 1994, 32, Steuter and Wills 2008, 158). The domestic arena of the two-level game is shaped by the media, and if policymakers want to influence it they will have to work through the media. To be effective, news management must usually be distinct from the disinterested provision of public information, but not actively mendacious (McNair 2000, 127, Louw 2005, 143). What matters above all is reactivity, how closely what news managers want to ‘sell’ matches, or can be made to match, what journalists want to ‘buy’.
Communications professionals adopt a range of tactics to influence what information becomes news. Habermas himself attacked the way “opinion management...invades the process of ‘public opinion’ by systematically creating news events or exploiting events that attract attention” (Habermas 1989, 193). Creating so-called ‘news events’ gives journalists source material to report on while leaders retain control of the images created and issues raised (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 6). This may not affect what the media writes, but it should influence what it writes about. Governments additionally hold privileged access to information about foreign policy (Hill 1981, 59-60, Jacobs 1992, 199). This allows them to shape news coverage through the inclusion or omission of specific facts (Hilsman 1987, 229). To the extent they understand public attitudes, and indeed possess sound political instincts, governments are expected to meet audience expectations (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, 1115). Good news managers can do this, combing time and skill to give both journalists and their audiences what they want, in the format they want, and with consequences favorable to their policymaking masters (Entman 2004, 120).

News managers have gained access to the heart of foreign policy decision making thanks to the combined effect of the faith (or hope) they inspire in political leaders, the need for favorable media coverage for foreign policy success, and the imperative to meet tight news deadlines. Donald Maitland ran the Foreign Office’s ‘News Department’ in the 1960s, and later served as Press Secretary to Prime Minister Ted Heath. Maitland described the “special relationship” between News Department and the Foreign Secretary, noting that as Head he enjoyed “access at all times to the Secretary of State” as well as “under secretaries, deputy under secretaries, the PUS and ministers at all times because they knew everything was urgent and they understood that they wouldn’t have been bothered unless it mattered” (Maitland 1997, 10, 12). John Leahy, head of News Department from 1971 to 1973, concurred. He noted that the Foreign Office took a unique approach to staffing its press teams
at that time, using mainstream members of the Diplomatic Service rather than outsiders from
the Civil Service Information Service. Leahy considered this ‘insider status’ an important
resource, ensuring he could speak both to the substance and communication of foreign policy,
and was taken seriously by colleagues interested in both (Leahy 2001, 14). Nicholas Fenn,
head of News Department 1979-1982, further highlighted the importance of control over the
Foreign Secretary’s media arrangements (Fenn 2010, 32). While media management was
formally a distinct aspect of the Foreign Office’s operations, even in Fenn’s time it was
increasingly closely associated with the office of the Foreign Secretary himself. As
Christopher Meyer, Head of News Department 1984-1988, put it, as press secretary “you’re
effectively part of his [the Foreign Secretary’s] private office” (Meyer 2004, 18). During
Tony Blair’s time in Downing Street, his communications chief Alastair Campbell arguably
“had more influence over New Labour foreign policy than did the various ministers
nominally in charge of the UK’s external affairs” (Daddow 2011, 226). As Campbell himself
put it, speaking to the Chilcot Inquiry, “not just on issues to do with foreign affairs and
security, but on any of the major issues and high profile issues, you have to have a
communications element, if you like, embedded in those policy discussions” (A. Campbell
2010, 7-8). That element, in Blair’s government, was Campbell himself.

This degree of access is important, both to the operation of a successful press office
and to the feedback effect that develops, through concern for communicability, between
media dynamics and the substance of foreign policy. Both the level of access granted to news
managers, and their capacity to use it to influence policy, varies according to the preferences
of particular policymakers. Leahy found Sir Alec Douglas-Home “not interested in managing
the news”, which “made the job of being his Head of News Department all the more
interesting and at times worrying” (Leahy 2001, 16). Meyer, by contrast, reflected on an early
appointment as speech-writer to James Callaghan, apparently stemming from a conversation
Callaghan had with Henry Kissinger. Kissinger told Callaghan his secret for publicizing foreign policy: “I give lots of speeches”. He also let slip that he had “a team of about twenty-five” speech-writers. Meyer then recounted that “Callaghan came back to the Foreign Office and said he’d like a team of speech-writers and was told that he could have one First Secretary [a relatively junior civil servant]! Which was me!” (Meyer 2004, 9). Clearly bureaucratic as well as individual preferences were at work. Reflecting on his speech-writing experiences, Meyer remarked of ministers “that a lot of them didn’t want just a speech; they wanted to be told what to think” (Meyer 2004, 11). This is an important point. Policymakers rely on their senior (and, in this case, less senior) advisers. If they include communications professionals within their inner circle, it is natural that they will turn to them for advice on substantive as well as purely presentational matters. Indeed, for the sort of expressive foreign policy represented by the constructivist theory of speech acts, there is little difference between substance and communication. A minister asking for advice on a speech declaring expressive policy positions is not just asking for advice on the speech, but inevitably also on the policy. If policies are made by writing speeches, speech-writers make policy.

Meyer followed his stint in News Department with a year as a Visiting Fellow at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard. While there he completed an unpublished paper recounting his conclusions from four years in charge of ‘selling’ Britain’s foreign policy. His observations provide important evidence supporting the notion of communicability across a number of dimensions. Meyer noted that not only was communication considered long before any policy reached the implementation stage, in contrast to the typical assumption in the FPA literature, it was in fact discussed “at an early stage of policy formulation”. Already by the 1980s, all FCO departments were required to consult News Department regularly “and copy to it all submissions (memoranda with policy recommendations) that may have a public dimension” (Meyer 1989, 11). More critically, he
made the fundamental observation that “Access inevitably takes the press officer into the realm of policy-making itself. He cannot be expected mechanically to take delivery of a policy already decided by others and then advise on how it should be presented. As important as his expertise on presentation is his advice on the presentability of a proposed course of action” (Meyer 1989, 38). Officials have understood how giving communications advisers access to policymakers shapes the substance of foreign policy, through their concern for and advice on communicability, for decades. It is time FPA caught up.

Feedback and the implications of communicability

Clearly the scope for substantive decisions to be tinged by communicative imperatives increases once communication advisers are brought in to policymaking discussions (McNair 2000, 127). It is a basic notion within FPA that the individuals involved in a process affect its nature and outcomes by shaping the information that reaches policymakers, and the manner in which it is presented (Hermann and Hermann 1989, 362). If media advisers form part of a policymaker’s inner circle, information and advice about the media will form part of the core set of materials policymakers have available as they make decisions. The introduction of communicability into substantive discussions establishes a “feedback loop” (Carlsnaes 1992, 261) between policymaking and the media. Decision-makers consider communication important to policy success and they have information available, through the presence of news managers, to help gauge the communicability of different policy options. It is reasonable to assume that this advice has some impact, not just on how foreign policy is ‘sold’ but on how it is made. News management can thus directly shape substantive foreign policy (Cohen 1973, 178, Jacobs 1992, 212, Webber and Smith 2002, 101). Once communication imperatives begin to influence substantive decision-
making, the policymaking process cannot proceed without reference to the broader public
debate. As we have seen, the successful ‘sale’ of foreign policy relies on the effective use of
communicative action to shape the public understanding of both the context for action and
the legitimacy of possible responses to it. Effective communicative action relies on the
communicator embedding their arguments in the fabric of public debate through their
identification with intersubjectively-established social facts. Just as rhetoric tends to move
towards the expectations of the audience in search of influence, so too the concern for
communicability shapes substantive policies in the direction of what leaders believe the
media will report and their constituents will accept.

Communicability can also generate political consequences that go beyond the
domestic audience costs highlighted in the narrower neoclassical realist account of
communication’s role in international politics. It can lead to an undesirable focus on the
personalities of policymakers rather than their policies (Baum 2006, 115). It can establish
criteria against which decisions are subsequently assessed, not always favorably as Tony
Blair and George W. Bush found (Baum and Potter 2008, 57, Casey 2008, 360, Wolfe 2008,
93-94, Reus-Smit 2013, 226). And it definitely shapes the range of possible justifications
available for leaders to use in future contexts (Kornprobst 2014, 203). After Iraq, no Western
leader will easily be able to win domestic support for military action to prevent a ‘rogue’
state developing Weapons of Mass destruction.

In the British context a critical example of this effect comes from the notorious
‘dossier’ published by the Blair government prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq detailing its
alleged development of Weapons of Mass Destruction. The Hutton Inquiry rejected the
suggestion the dossier had, in the words of BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan, been ‘sexed up’.
Hutton concluded, however, that;
“the possibility cannot be completely ruled out that the desire of the Prime Minister to have a dossier which...was as strong as possible in relation to the threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s WMD, may have subconsciously influenced Mr Scarlett and the other members of the JIC to make the wording of the dossier somewhat stronger than it would have been if it had been contained in a normal JIC assessment” (Hutton 2004, 152-153).

Lawrence Freedman, who later became a member of the Chilcot Inquiry panel, concurred, noting that “if they [the JIC] had judged differently, then there would have been great embarrassment, because unequivocal claims had already been made” by ministers, in public, stating explicitly that Iraq definitely had WMD (Freedman 2004, 27). Interestingly, former GCHQ chief and Cabinet Office Security Co-Ordinator David Omand told the Chilcot Inquiry he felt the drafting process had not directly been affected by pressure from government news managers, that “I think by then I knew John Scarlett [chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee] well enough, and he knew me well enough, that, if he had felt under pressure, he would have put his head round my office door and said, ‘Can you help me fend these people off?’ But he didn't” (Omand 2010, 23). On this occasion, the officials involved had apparently internalized the logic of news management, a point underlined by Alastair Campbell’s repeated praise for Scarlett in his book (Campbell and Stott 2007, 618). The problem, however, was that while ministers stated unequivocally that Iraq posed a military threat to the United Kingdom, in practice it did not. The absence of WMD after the invasion proved “critically damaging” to the legitimacy of the entire enterprise (Michalski and Gow 2007, 145). The Blair government had engaged in a program of “organized political persuasion” involving “deliberate deception through omission and distortion” (Herring and Robinson 2014). It had been found out, and the consequences of its communicative failure was significant damage to the legitimacy, and so the effectiveness and sustainability, of its substantive policy in Iraq.

Communicability also has more practical consequences in terms of the process as well as the outcomes of policymaking. Not only are news managers seen as vital participants in
policymaking, they are sometimes seen as more vital than supposed policy experts. Christopher Meyer became Ambassador to the United States in 1997, stepping down one month before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Shortly after 11 September 2001, Tony Blair visited the US to attend President Bush’s declaration of ‘war on terrorism’ to Congress. Blair’s Chief of Staff, ex-diplomat Jonathan Powell, told Meyer shortly before arriving in Washington that his presence would not be required at the crucial meeting between Blair and Bush. In a break with diplomatic protocol, Blair preferred to have Alastair Campbell present to advise on communicability rather than having Meyer there to offer policy advice. Campbell thought the resulting row “a bit silly” (Campbell and Stott 2007, 573). Meyer saw things rather differently, his response was “furious and expletive-laden”, and he threatened to resign on the spot (Meyer 2005, 202). In the end, cooler heads prevailed, and both men joined the meeting. There was a particular irony to the exchange given Meyer’s own career history, not to mention the fact he was Blair’s personal choice for the Washington job. Bringing press officers in to decision making had been a first step, one Meyer witnessed first-hand in the 1980s. Blair went further by, at least on this occasion, prioritizing their input over that of the supposed policy experts.

**Conclusion**

Blair told the Leveson Inquiry that he “tried very hard to keep the line between persuading the media of a policy; and allowing them privileged access in formulating it”. At the same time, he conceded “it could be very hard to adopt a policy when it was likely to be the subject of an intense media campaign against it” (Blair 2012, 5). It seems evident from the record that he did not always maintain the line he sought to hold. By shaping how policies are judged legitimate (or otherwise) and displacing policy advice within the decision-making
process, the concern with communicability and the concomitant introduction of media advice into substantive discussions fundamentally affected his policies. This was not just a matter of one leader’s personal preferences, as the wider range of historical sources considered here shows. It reflects a long-established trend in how Britain makes foreign policy.

Communicability has concerned British foreign policymakers for decades. Its negative consequences appeared with particular clarity during the premiership of Tony Blair, but Blair was not the first leader to pay attention to public communication, nor will he be the last. As for the wider generalizability of communicability, its conceptual foundations derive primarily from research on the US. We would expect to see, in other words, every bit as much of a role for communicability in US foreign policy as we see in the UK. The media environment is just as competitive. Policymakers are just as concerned with the implications of how their policies play out online, on TV and in the pages of the press. Communication professionals, as James Callaghan’s conversation with Henry Kissinger indicates, are far more numerous in the US than in the UK system, if not necessarily more influential. Indeed, every state should exhibit some concern for communicability. Every state is subject to the same conceptual forces discussed in the first part of this paper. These forces’ practical implications will vary, naturally, among states of different types. It matters whether the media market is a free one, or what penalties exist for expressing views at odds with the official line. Communicability will be easier to achieve in more restrictive states. But that does not mean it will raise no concerns and have no effect at all on substantive decision-making. Even in undemocratic states, the substance and communication of foreign policy inevitably interact.

FPA need not overthrow its existing accounts of how policymaking operates. That is not the approach advocated here. Rather it should show at least some sensitivity towards the place of communication in the foreign policy process. This goal can be attained using the
concept of communicability. Communicability bridges the gap between abstract theories of how public communication affects international politics, and the concrete empirical observations that make up the bulk of FPA. It posits that foreign policy decisions are made with one eye on how they can subsequently be communicated. Since good communication, in both abstract theoretical and grounded empirical accounts, requires that communicators respond to audience ideas and preferences, the introduction of communication advice into policymaking creates a feedback loop in which public debate and media practices inevitably affect the nature and timing of specific, substantive decisions. News managers gain access to substantive decision-making because policymakers believe news management matters to policy success, and because the speed with which the contemporary media operates makes strictly separating substantive and communicative elements impossible. In the process they bring a concern with what the media wants and how it operates to the heart of foreign policymaking. Most of the time this simply leads to more presentable policies. But it also opens up new risks. These go beyond the domestic audience costs established in the neoclassical realist literature to include threats to the (socially constructed) legitimacy of policies, information deficits driven by the pressure to make decisions quickly in order to meet media deadlines and the potential for policy advice to be squeezed out by more imminent presentational concerns. Unless FPA considers communication seriously, it cannot take these vital dynamics properly into account.
Bibliography


